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CINEMA JOURNAL

28, No. 3, Spring 1989

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Jacques Ledoux: 1921-88

by Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell

As all too many obituaries have had to point out recently, the year 1988 took from us several major figures in the study of cinema history. The public prominence of some of these figures, such as Jay Leyda, Jean Mitry, and George Pratt, may have obscured to some degree the importance of another passing. Jacques Ledoux was a singularly self-effacing person. As long-time curator of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique and influential Secretary General of the Fédération des Archives du Film (FIAF), Ledoux's contributions to the preservation, dissemination, and encouragement of the cinema have been unsurpassed in the entire history of the art. Yet precisely because Ledoux devoted himself so thoroughly to his chosen goals and revealed so little of his personal life even to his friends, the simplest facts concerning him are often unknown or uncertain.

Ledoux was born in 1921 in Warsaw, but his family soon moved to Brussels, where he was brought up. While he was in his teens, he became a devoted cinéphile. He went to the university to study first philosophy and then engineering. In 1938, while a student, he attended a screening at the recently formed Cinémathèque Française in Paris, where he met its principal founder, Henri Langlois.

World War II interrupted Ledoux's studies and nearly ended his life. During the German occupation of Belgium, he and his parents were put onto a train, presumably bound for a death camp. Ledoux managed to escape, but his parents were later killed. He spent the rest of the war in hiding at the Benedictine Abbey of Maredsous in the south of Belgium, where the monks had taken him in. At that point he took the name Jacques Ledoux (literally, "Jacques the gentle"), and no source we have consulted has recorded his real name. At the monastery he worked in the publishing department. There he discovered a nitrate print of *Nanook of the North,* which he took with him when he returned to Brussels in 1945. He donated the print to the national film archive there (which had been formed in 1938) and worked as a volunteer archivist while continuing his engineering studies. He also worked as a programmer for the Ecran du Séminaire des Arts, Belgium's largest ciné-club.

In 1948 Ledoux was appointed curator of the Cinémathèque, a position he held until his death on 7 June 1988. Although he was an avid collector of prints,

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from the start he paid equal attention to their preservation. In 1949 the Cinémathèque installed the first air-conditioned nitrate vault in any European archive.

It would be difficult to find a type of cinema in which Ledoux was not interested. His devotion to older films was balanced by his interest in contemporary experimental cinema. In 1949 he held the first festival of experimental films at Knokke le Zoute, an event which continued irregularly thereafter, but which gave early exposure to as-yet-unknown directors such as Roman Polanski, Michael Snow, Martin Scorsese, Brian de Palma, and Werner Schroeter, among others. In 1973 he instituted the annual L'Age d'Or prize, designed to encourage experimental films in the same rebellious vein as Buñuel's 1930 classic.

Ledoux both preserved old films and encouraged the making of new ones. But beyond this, he was concerned that audiences of all types should have access to as broad a range of films as possible. The Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique also runs the Musée du Cinéma, which consists of two screening rooms and a collection of pre-cinema devices and early cinema machines, displayed in the lobby of the theaters. Its hands-on design, whereby visitors can activate, with a crank or button, Zoetropes, Phenakistiscopes, Thaumatropes, and other optical devices, has become a model for other museum displays. The larger *salle*, originally the only screening facility, has shown extensive retrospectives of films from all countries and periods. The Musée remains open 365 days a year, and the price of admission has been deliberately kept low (during our visits between 1979 and 1984, the price remained constant at 30 Belgian Francs—about 50 cents to one dollar, depending on the exchange rate), so that virtually anyone can afford to attend. In 1982, a second *salle* with 30 seats was added; it shows only silent films, always with piano accompaniment and with a variable-speed projector to permit an approximation of the original running speed for each film. Between the two theaters, one typically has a choice of at least five programs per day. The Musée and its screenings will, we hope, remain as one of Ledoux's principal legacies.

Beyond the achievement of building the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique into one of the largest archives in the world, Ledoux had a considerable impact on the shape of world archival policy and thus on the writing of film history itself.

A turning point for the history of film archives came in the years 1959-60. Up to that time, Henri Langlois, founder and head of the Cinémathèque Française, had dominated FIAF policy. Essentially the emphasis was on archivists as devoted lovers of cinema, collecting prints of old films and showing them publicly, with relatively little emphasis on preservation. Langlois also favored a relatively loose organization for FIAF itself. Ledoux, on the other hand, wanted to introduce rigorous methods for member archives, with a strong emphasis on a scientific approach to preserving the delicate, decomposing nitrate prints that formed the bulk of most collections. As he became increasingly prominent in FIAF (where he served as Secretary General from 1961 to 1977), he initiated research into questions concerning the best methods of treating nitrate stock and color prints;

inquiries into similar problems still form one major area of development within FIAF. Ledoux also dealt with issues of international copyright and decision-making policy within the member archives. Eventually he resigned from his leadership post, apparently because the strict rules for FIAF membership were relaxed somewhat to allow archives with less than optimal preservation facilities to join.

Ledoux's emphasis on strict guidelines and technical matters apparently was a major factor in causing Langlois to pull the Cinémathèque Française out of FIAF in 1960. (The Japanese and Swiss national archives also withdrew, in support of Langlois. The French archive rejoined FIAF years later, after Langlois's death.) Ledoux's approach, however, made enormous contributions to the shift toward the emphasis on preservation and restoration that has remained central archival policy to this day. Such policies have resulted in the restored prints of silent films which have become a frequent feature of international festivals and even television specials in recent years, creating a new interest in early cinema among the general public. While the years from the 1930s to the 1950s were the era of the enthusiastic but often unsystematic gathering of prints, the period from the 1960s to the present has seen the preservation of that heritage, as well as the more organized search for nitrate prints in various countries and their transfer to safety stock.

Moreover, the more open policies which encourage archives to make known their holdings to each other and to exchange the footage necessary for restoration work is in significant measure due to policies Ledoux established. His most famous undertaking in this regard was his initiation of the international gathering of various prints of Gance's *Napoléon*, aiding in Kevin Brownlow's lengthy reconstruction of that film. Ledoux was also involved in numerous other, less famous, projects to locate, preserve, and restore rare films.

Such projects often went unnoticed outside a small circle of interested film scholars, since Ledoux made no attempt to publicize the accomplishments of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique. Though few Americans seem to be aware of it as one of the world's largest archives, Ledoux's reputation in the countries of northwestern Europe was strong. In May of 1988 it was announced that he had been named as a recipient of the prestigious Erasmus Prize, a Dutch award given to distinguished persons and institutions for their contributions to European cultural and social life. Former recipients have included Marc Chagall, Amnesty International, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Henry Moore. Only once before had the prize been given in the area of the cinema: jointly to Charles Chaplin and Ingmar Bergman in 1965. Unfortunately Ledoux did not live to receive the prize himself. He was awarded the Erasmus Prize posthumously on 16 November 1988.

As this account of Ledoux's life hints, he was a controversial figure. The Ledoux-Langlois feud, which is dealt with in sketchy fashion in Richard Roud's biography of Langlois, is only the most prominent of many disagreements over the years. Ledoux's was a strong personality, and he made enemies as well as

friends. Perhaps Raymond Borde, who knew him well, summarized him best in his 1983 book *Les Cinémathèques*:

> Lucid, charming, and sarcastic, Jacques Ledoux left his mark on the history of film archives in their departure from subjectivism. He became the conscience of FIAF because he had a policy and because the means of achieving it would be a strict insistence on coherent objectivity.
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> Rigorous: that is ultimately the word which best defined the new Secretary General of the Fédération. He came to the career of archivist through the magic of the screen and he belongs to the first generation of archivists, that of the cinéphiles. . . .
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> Everything that he has undertaken: learned publications, indexes, the experimental cinema festivals at Knokke le Zoute, le Prix de l'Age d'Or, carries this mark, this Ledoux touch which appears simultaneously passionate and finicky. That is why he arouses contradictory reactions. One loves him or one fears him.

We loved him. We were lucky enough never to see the side of Ledoux that alienated or frustrated some. To us, and to many others, he was always generous and friendly. He was interested in our projects, and we talked about them and about other cinema-related topics over many a meal (often one snatched at a restaurant near the Palais des Beaux Arts so that we could rush back to a screening at the Musée du Cinéma). He was like a favorite uncle to us—not one we inherited through accident of birth, but one we chose, and who chose us, because we sized each other up at our first meetings and realized that we were all devoted to the art of the cinema.

Luckily, precisely because Ledoux was so very systematic in his dedication to preserving and promoting the cinema, most of what he worked for will remain with Western film culture. Just how extensive his accomplishments have been will probably become apparent only gradually, over many years to come.